



## **AFRICA/SOUTH SUDAN - The Bishops: "Do not exclude the Church and civil society from peace talks"**

Juba (Agenzia Fides) - Why has the Church been excluded from the peace talks in Addis Ababa? Ask the Bishops of Sudan and South Sudan in the Pastoral Exhortation published at the end of their Plenary Assembly held in Juba from January 21 to 31.

The talks in the Ethiopian capital, mediated by IGAD, are aimed at finding a final peace agreement (after the ceasefire on 23 January) between the two rival factions of the SPLM (Sudan People's Liberation Movement, the ruling party) respectively led by President Salva Kiir and former Vice President Riek Machar who have sunk South Sudan into the most serious crisis since its independence in July 2011.

The Bishops recall that the South Sudanese churches were called upon to mediate other situations of crisis; in these days an agreement was reached with the rebellion of David Yau Yau in Jonglei State, through the mediation of churches (see Fides 31/1/2014).

The exclusion of churches and other civic groups, say the Bishops, threatens to undermine the root of any future agreement reached between the warring parties: "what is the legitimacy of any agreement signed in Addis Ababa built on military groups determining our future? A handful of political leaders instigated a crisis in which their followers have devastated the country; how can they alone be entrusted with negotiating the future of the nation without input from the citizens?".

The document stresses that the violence erupted on December 15 stems from a crisis of leadership within the SPLM, whose internal tensions "should not destabilize the Country", as well as the spread of corruption and nepotism. In addition there are tensions between different communities fueled "by the negative stories that poison social relations".

Last month's violence in particular affected the Diocese of Malakal, whose territory covers the states of Jonglei, Upper Nile and Unity. The Bishops launch an appeal to the solidarity of all to help the people in need.

The document concludes by renewing the Church's commitment to contributing to peace and national reconciliation and human development in South Sudan and Sudan. (L.M.) (Agenzia Fides 01/02/2014)